

The teacher's sense of plausibility revisited

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Abstract

My aim is to give substance to Prabhu's (1987) concept of 'the teacher's sense of plausibility'. That is to say, explore the way teachers develop professionally and personally by building a personal theory of teaching action based upon their own accumulated experiences - and reflection on them. Objective history is useful but perhaps more interesting are our personal histories. In this paper I shall attempt to link my own personal history in ELT to the places I have worked in, to the personalities I have encountered, to the evolving currents of ideas and publications, and to key critical moments in my own development. I shall weave together the five strands of places, personalities, ideas, publications and critical moments to demonstrate how they have influenced the direction of my own continuing development of a personal 'theory' of teaching. I shall suggest that this kind of reflective process can be a valuable element within the framework of teacher development as a whole.

Keywords: sense of plausibility, self-study, critical reflection, personal history, personal theory of teaching

Introduction

This article will be an attempt to put flesh on the framework of Prabhu's concept of 'The teacher's sense of plausibility' (1987) by referring it to my own experience. My understanding of Prabhu's concept is that teachers build their personal theories of teaching and learning through a continuing process of reflection on their lived experiences. It is this process which fuels their personal and professional growth. This conceptualisation of teacher development is significantly different from the 'training' paradigm which currently enjoys popular assent. The 'training' paradigm is broadly algorithmic in nature: 'If we give teachers X forms of training, they will emerge with Y competences.' The 'plausibility' paradigm, by contrast, is broadly heuristic: 'Whatever training we give them, teachers will adapt and transform it according to what works for them and to the belief system they have evolved, and this is forged through the experiences they undergo'.

I shall pursue Prabhu's idea with reference to my own personal experience in relation to the places I have worked in, to the personalities who have been influential, to the ideas and publications in fashion at different stages and to critical moments in my life path. Though I shall separate these for the sake of convenience, they are intricately connected in a cohesive, though not always coherent network which forms part of who I am.

Critics may argue that this approach is unduly personal and anecdotal and lacks scientific rigour. I would respond by insisting that the act of teaching and learning is not scientific anyway but highly individual and personal to both learners and teachers. While my own 'sense of plausibility' will be different from that of other teachers, my expectation is that some valuable truths may emerge from it which are shared across the profession – and that we might do well to attend to them at least as much as we do to the more algorithmic systems of teacher education.

Early influences

Many of our deeply-held beliefs about language and education are formed well before we begin training as teachers of language. Long before I embarked on ELT training, I had had a number of highly formative experiences which still colour my thinking. Here I will cite just four of them.

1) I went to a small country primary school in the UK. At that time, there was a standardised test of intelligence, taken at age 11, which determined whether a child was selected to go to a Grammar School – and from there to higher education and a well-paid career – or whether they would be relegated to the rubbish dump of Secondary Modern schools, with poor job prospects at best. The test was called 'The 11+'. I had no understanding of the importance of this test, and neither did my parents, who were themselves educational rejects. Along with my classmates, I took the test...and failed it. In other words, the test judged me to be dumb. I was assigned to a Secondary Modern school.

However, fate offered me a helping hand. An experimental class had been set up to prepare some of us to take the same state exams as those taken by Grammar School kids. Our teachers were genuinely supportive and I passed my GCE five years later in 7 subjects. Thanks to the intervention of my kindly headmaster, I transferred to the 6th Form of a Grammar School and from there, thanks to the support of another Headmaster, was offered scholarships to both Oxford and Cambridge Universities.

What were the enduring beliefs I formed on the basis of these experiences?

- a) A profound distrust of and disrespect for standardised testing.
- b) A belief that teachers can be agents of transformation.
- c) A belief that, if you are reasonably intelligent, hard work will get you a long way.
- d) Without some luck, it is difficult to succeed.

2) Aged 12, my French teacher, who in retrospect I realise was a genius, both as a linguist and as a pedagogue, arranged an exchange with a French boy my age. He spent a month with us in England, I then spent a month with his family in the Savoie in France. Dear Emile refused to utter a word of English while with us, and in France, no one spoke a word anyway. So I got 2 months of total immersion and emerged with passable oral French and an enormous boost to my self-esteem, and some understanding of the way people in other countries manage their lives.

What were the enduring beliefs I formed on the basis of these experiences?

- a) That being able to speak a foreign language was a major advantage.
- b) That teachers can change their students' lives for the better. This had been a truly transformative experience for me. It literally changed my life for ever.
- c) That I could learn a lot on my own, without a teacher.
- d) That learning languages was a lot of fun.
- e) A growing suspicion that I might be good at something after all.

3) Aged 18, I was conscripted into the Royal Airforce, to do 2 years of National Service. After initial training, I was provisionally selected to have specialist training in Chinese. We were all subjected to a standardised aural test of spoken Chinese tones. I failed the test and was declared tone-deaf and therefore unfit to learn Chinese. I was sent to Germany to operate a radar instead. (And there, I learnt German, by myself without the help of the RAF. I also taught myself to read Middle English so that I could read Chaucer in the original.)

What were the enduring beliefs I formed on the basis of these experiences?

- a) That tests had once more been shown to be flawed and unfit for purpose.
- b) That failure was a very negative thing which affected my self-image deeply.
- c) That institutional education can be acutely unfair. I was convinced that I had a good ear for languages yet I had been excluded by another standardised test. (My belief was vindicated

when I subsequently learned Mandarin Chinese while working in Beijing from 1980-84.)

4) Following this negative experience, I spent 18 months as a radar operator in Schleswig-Holstein, North Germany. I decided I would learn German, partly as a salve to heal the bruises inflicted by the Chinese test. I had a few classes with a young officer on the base but he was a grammar-translation man with a very literary bent so I soon gave him up. Instead I taught myself to read German and developed spoken German with the aid of a charming young lady. This was highly motivating and I made rapid progress.

What were the enduring beliefs I formed on the basis of these experiences?

- a) That teachers were only of limited use.
- b) That reading was a very powerful technique for learning a language.
- c) That language learning is a highly emotional, deeply personal experience, not just a rational one.
- d) That I was beginning to get the hang of learning languages, and was not afraid of trying more of them.

So, even before I started my induction into the ELT/Applied linguistics tribe, I already had some strongly-held views about both education and about language.

Training: University of Leeds (1961-1962)

After joining the British Council, I was sent to join the first batch of students to undergo a one-year, post-graduate training course at Leeds. Applied Linguistics was the Brave New World at the time and Leeds had followed Edinburgh and London in setting up this new course under Prof. Peter Strevens and Pit Corder. I had absolutely no idea what it was all about when I started and precious little more at the end. I remember the course as a patchwork of largely unrelated topics – phonetics, Hallidayan grammar (all the rage at the time), general topics in Applied Linguistics and so on.

The ruling paradigm, insofar as there was one, was the Structural/Situational approach with a dash of Direct Method, with its theoretical basis in Firth, early practical applications from Palmer, Hornby and West, and more recent contributions from Billows, Strevens and others.

There was an acute paucity of publications. Apart from the practical contributions of Palmer, Hornby and West, virtually the only useful books were Michael West's *The Teaching of English in Difficult Circumstances* (1960) and Lionel Billows' *The Techniques of Language Teaching*, hot off

the press in 1961. Halliday, McIntosh and Stevens' *The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching* did not come out until 1964, though we were given cyclostyled copies of parts of it.

There was virtually no emphasis on practical classroom teaching – this was to be taken care of by our practicum, which took place in Madrid under the watchful but easily distracted eye of the British Council. I was assigned to teach classes in two institutions.

One was the convent school of Santa Isabel for adolescent, upper-class girls. I have only vague memories of what I taught but we had a lot of fun, and would have had more had it not been for the austere presence of a nun sitting at the back of the class!

The other was the university Instituto Superior de Aeronauticos, teaching young men. Here I encountered discipline and motivation problems which still haunt my dreams. English was a required subject but few if any of the students had any interest in it, resented having to study it, and regarded the classes as an opportunity to create mayhem. Their regular teacher, a middle-aged Englishman with no teaching qualifications whatever, advised me to do lots of dictations and reading aloud round the class as a way of keeping minimal control. I ignored his advice, tried to make my classes interesting, and was duly crucified. It was like spitting into the wind.

At the British Council, Jack Bruton was developing a structural description of English independently of British academic institutions. The aim was to use this as a practical guide for developing teaching materials. This was an early example of action outside the controlling box of academia.

Back in Leeds, I had my first experience of academic writing – a dissertation on Fanakalo, the lingua franca I had learned while working in the South African gold mines. It was not much use for teaching English but a dissertation was required. And it gave me some more insights into how languages, especially Bantu languages, function – Fanakalo is a blend of English, Afrikaans and Xhosa.

Finally, through a small seminar group run by Professor Derry Jeffares, and amply fuelled by sherry, I was introduced to contemporary English literature and what was called at the time Commonwealth literature – literature in English originating in Africa, the Indian sub-Continent, Singapore/Malaysia, The Caribbean, etc.

What influence did these experiences have on me?

- a) I became sharply aware of the divide between academic theorising and classroom reality.

- b) I realised that my future did not lie in academic research but rather in exploring practical materials and methods.
- c) I realised that the socio-political context strongly influences language teaching. (The Franco regime in Spain was lukewarm toward anything foreign.)
- d) Motivation is key to learning. Unmotivated students do not learn much.
- e) Colleagues can often be more helpful than lecturers. (Luckily my classmates included many with extensive overseas teaching experience which they shared with the novices like me).
- f) I developed what was to be a lifelong interest in literature in English written by non-native speakers of the language and in the many evolving varieties of English worldwide.

Yugoslavia (1962-1966)

The British Council posted me to Beograd in the then Yugoslavia. My duties were vague, so I became a sort of odd-job man. I organised talks on language and teaching – subjects I was precariously ignorant of. I administered a scholarship programme to send key, up-and-coming Yugoslav university staff to UK for MA and PhD work. I participated in Federal Summer Schools attended by teachers of French, German, Russian and English. I helped out with checking and recording teaching materials for publication. I administered and expanded a programme for supplying British lektors to Yugoslav universities. I arranged visits from senior British ELT personalities, such as the dour Angus McIntosh and the delightful A S Hornby. I even conducted informal conversations with a group of dissident philosophers (The Praxis group), and held regular play-readings for teachers in my flat. And I toured the country far and wide, building contacts mainly with universities. It was a ragbag of activities.

However, I did work with Professor Rudi Filipovic on the Federal summer schools and learnt something about the work on audio-visual methods then being pioneered in Zagreb under Professor Guberina. (Filipovic & Webster, 1962). It was also instructive to work with trainers of Russian, German and French to see how they did things. I worked alongside language specialists from USIS too, and learned something about the audio-lingual approach then popular in the US.

The political climate was not especially favourable for the promotion of English. Tito was at the height of his power, the Communist party controlled many aspects of everyday life and the government worked hard to avoid any suspicion of favouring one language over another. This was to

avert conflict with Russia, with whom Yugoslavia had a delicate and ambivalent relationship. So much of my time was taken up in getting round bureaucratic rules and regulations. This was good training for some of my subsequent jobs.

On the personal front, I learned Serbo-Croat and did a lot of socialising. For a few months I had one-to-one lessons, once a week, with a senior teacher at the Institute of Foreign Languages. She was a gentle and sensitive teacher who overcame the ghastly course-book she was obliged to use. Once I felt I'd begun to function in Serbo-Croat, I stopped taking lessons and concentrated on reading as much as possible and on using the language in my work and with friends. It was only two years later, when I was preparing to take the Foreign Office proficiency exam, that I sought the help of a friend who taught English at the University of Beograd. He skilfully pointed me in the direction of reading materials and 'scaffolded' my imperfect use of grammar and lexis. This minimalist approach suited me well.

I had also learned a lot about socio-linguistics and language policy (though I would not have used these terms at the time). Yugoslavia was a federal republic composed of six republics: Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Slovenia, and of two 'autonomous regions' – Kosovo-Metohija and Vojvodina. This patchwork of peoples used at least eight languages between them: Serbo-Croat, Slovene, Macedonian, Hungarian, Albanian, Vlach (Romanian), Slovak and Italian. It was a master class for me in the delicate balance pluri-lingual societies need to function.

What did I take away from the Yugoslav experiences?

- a) I learnt more about how to learn a language – in this case a Slavonic language with a different script.
- b) My teachers taught me the value of timely intervention to help me at key moments chosen by me rather than through routine drudgery.
- c) The value of reading and social interaction was reinforced.
- d) I began to understand the complexity of plural-lingual societies.
- e) I began to have my first intimations of the importance of 'method'.
- f) Also I experienced the first stirrings of an interest in materials development.

To summarise where I was in my own development, I still had only the vaguest notion that I was part of an evolving profession. ELT (now ELTJ – English Language Teaching Journal) had only been founded in 1946 and was a very modest publication, and IATEFL (International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language) had yet to be founded in 1967.

So ELT as a profession was in its infancy and I was similarly at the beginning of my proto-professional period.

Ghana (1966-1970)

I was next posted to Accra, Ghana, as English Language Officer for the British Council.

Ghana, on the west coast of Africa, was an ex-British colony. English was the official language but there were 9 officially-recognised languages, including Ewe, the Akan group, Nzema, Waale and Dangbe. West African pidgin was also in wide use as a lingua franca, as was Hausa in the north. So this was another complex linguistic situation, where English was a second language for official purposes, and where most people routinely spoke at least three African languages.

My job there was again quite vaguely defined but it quickly became clear that the sector in most need of development was primary education. I knew nothing about teaching primary school children and nothing in my so-called 'training' or previous experience had prepared me for this. But very soon, I found myself with a colleague running one-month re-training courses for primary teachers in remote areas of the country. A major part of the content of these courses involved teaching maths and science through the medium of English. This was the time when *The New Maths* and *The New Science* were at their peak in schools in UK, and it was from them that we took our ideas. The courses were entirely practical, working with low resources, where the participants were themselves economically deprived. I learnt a great deal from trial and error and from the participants and the children too.

One rapid discovery was the necessity for improvisation. We involved teachers in making puppets from old newspapers then improvising plays and puppet theatres, art work from items of rubbish, making colours from natural materials, creating songs and chants and stories drawing on the rich local folk traditions, making telephones from string and plastic cups. Resource-poor led to resource-fulness.

I had my first, ambivalent experiences of educational technology – the clumsy Banda spirit duplicators we took on tour with us, cyclostyle machines with their wrinkled, waxed-paper master sheets (photocopiers were still in the future), old film projectors running off improvised batteries to project films outdoors onto bed sheets hung between trees, massive Grundig tape recorders that needed two people to lift them and even record players with old 78 discs of teaching materials... I also inherited a small language laboratory, supposedly the solution to all our teaching problems. It was ill-suited to the tropics and soon broke down. I sold it to a Lebanese

trader who broke it up and sold the spare parts...But Ghana Radio did a good job of broadcasting learning materials, and I became involved in writing series of programmes using Songs and Rhymes for Primary Schools.

Ghana also provided me with my first publishing opportunities. A colleague and I were approached by Thomas Nelson publishers to produce a book of guided conversational dialogues rooted in the West African context. I went on to publish a book of playlets based on the Ananse folk stories. I also contributed material to a major course for West Africa and published two sets of material for Radio Ghana. This was a useful apprenticeship.

I also discovered the tendency of institutions like ministries of education to launch grand schemes without regard to local realities. It had been decided that all children should attend primary school from class P1. But there were often no schools nor teachers. The solution was to found a large number of teacher training colleges. But again, there were often no buildings and no staff competent to teach in them. The solution was to found one Advanced Training College, which would train the trainers, who would then train the teachers, who would then staff the schools and teach the children. This kind of back-to-front planning led to many shortcomings in the schools. Perhaps the most glaring example of a mindless project was the provision of television sets for community centres across the country, funded by aid money. Only after the sets had been installed was it discovered that many places did not have electricity!

What were the enduring influences from my Ghanaian experiences?

1. The understanding that teaching English as a subject was less important than education in other subjects through English.
2. The importance of drawing on feeder fields – in this case primary maths, science and ‘oracy’ (MacLure et al, 1988)
3. That low material resource situations could be offset by improvisation and exploiting the richness of human resources.
4. A belief in the importance of creative activities in language education: drama, music, stories and artwork in particular.
5. A degree of scepticism about the uncritical adoption of technology.
6. A renewed interest in West African writing in English. This was a golden age, particularly in Nigeria.
7. The realisation that there were some fundamental differences between teaching English as a Second language and as a Foreign language.
8. An initiation into the world of publishing and materials development, then in its infancy.

Italy (1970-1974)

I was next posted to Milan as English Language Officer, North Italy. The contrast with Ghana could hardly have been greater. Italy was, and still is, a country with a long cultural history. In many ways it was a highly traditional and conservative society, in education as in other ways. Yet I arrived in the middle of a period of turbulent contestation, with universities and some schools paralysed by strikes and sit-ins. Extreme right wing and left wing groups committed many acts of violence during the period.

On the language teaching front there was also a great stirring, which I had been largely insulated from during my 5 years in Africa. The work of Wilkins (1976) and others had challenged the reigning paradigm. The Communicative Approach, with its focus on meaning-focussed rather than form-focussed teaching had led to a plethora of articles, books (Widdowson, 1978) and new course materials (O'Neill, 1971; Abbs & Freebairn, 1977; Alexander, 1967). And the Council of Europe's Threshold Level (van Ek & Trim, 1991) was bringing about a fresh approach to curriculum design. A stimulating breeze was blowing through the whole of ELT.

Italy was not exempt from these currents of change. The teaching of English, especially at secondary level, was highly traditional. I was fortunate to have as my colleague in Rome, Donn Byrne, a leading ELT practitioner and author with years of experience. In cooperation with a group of forward-thinking university and secondary teachers, including Sirio di Giulimaria and Wanda D'Addio, he helped bring into existence a group called LEND (*Lingua e Nuova Didattica*). Their aim was to transform the teaching of English, especially at secondary level and to bring it into line with the new insights of the Communicative movement. I became involved in a succession of conferences and workshops promoting these ideas. And in my own area, I began to form teachers' groups in a number of cities across the North. Eventually all this led to the setting up of a government-sponsored re-training scheme for teachers.

At a more mundane level, I was responsible for the administration of the Cambridge First certificate and Proficiency Exams in northern cities.

This frenzy of activity left little time for writing for publication, though I did write two collections of exercises for Longman/British Council, meant to be used in language labs. I also embarked on a course-book series for Nelson, which petered out and was never completed. In retrospect, I had over-estimated my own ability and should have built a team to write something so ambitious.

I was also participating in the development of the ELT profession, though I was only dimly aware of it. In 1970, I joined IATEFL and

participated in its annual conferences. I began to read more professional literature as the ELT/Applied linguistics community started to publish more.

I took full advantage of living in Italy to learn Italian. To begin with, I had a one-to-one teacher. She was a disaster – dogmatic, devoted to grammar and inflexible. I sent her away after just two lessons. I learnt through reading fiction, which opened up to me the richness of contemporary Italian literature – undeservedly neglected in the Anglo-Saxon world. I also read a weekly news journal, ‘L’Espresso’ from cover to cover, trying not to use a dictionary except as a last resort. I watched TV news. And I made some close friends among the Italian English teachers, who gave me information on grammar and usage and help as I needed it. Timely interventions again.

What effects did the Italian experience have on my personal and professional evolution?

1. I started to think of myself as a member of the ELT discourse community and became more curious about the flood of new ideas coming on stream.
2. I realised the power of group action, partly through the LEND experience, partly through IATEFL. Groups facilitated the sharing of ideas and problems, gave support to their members and acted as pressure groups which could change the way things were done.
3. I became acutely aware of the resistance to new ideas among conservative, traditional teachers and realised that change cannot be imposed from above, it has to grow from within.
4. I learned more about my own ways of tackling a new language and began to understand just how wide the gap was between my personal learning style and the ones espoused by institutional education.

France (1974 – 1980)

I was next posted to Paris as the first ever English Language Officer with the British Council. I had a free hand to do anything I liked, so I did. Like Italy, the teaching of English in France was somewhat traditional and teachers rather conservative. The audio-visual movement had made some headway but the qualifying exam, the baccalaureat, was still very grammar and text based. Change was in the air however, particularly in the Tertiary sector, which had also been shaken up by the student unrest of 1968. And there was a growing awareness in big companies that proficiency in English was an essential qualification for business success. Many large companies set up their own, innovative teaching sections. Government also stimulated adult language learning (among other kinds of learning) through the law on

Formation Continue, which required firms to contribute financially to the continuing education of their employees. So conditions were relatively favourable to new ideas.

I worked closely with the Ministry of Education through the system of inspectors at regional and departmental level, running in-service workshops for teachers all over France promoting more communicative activities. In this I was ably assisted by Alan Duff, who I had recruited from Yugoslavia to help me. Alan was to be a key figure in my own development and in the series of books we wrote together. I was also part of a team, led by Guy Capelle and Denis Girard, writing a textbook for the secondary level, called *Making Sense*. This brought me in contact with Francoise Grellet, one of the most brilliant and innovative teachers I had ever met. This too led to other books in which we cooperated.

Apart from working with the Ministry, I also ran a programme of workshops at the British Council itself. This was aimed at introducing the rich array of new ideas then current in the field to teachers at all levels. Being so close to the UK meant it was easy to bring over key figures to lead workshops, ranging from Henry Widdowson and Chris Brumfit to Chris Candlin, John Sinclair and Dick Allwright. We were also able to offer experimental sessions on the so-called 'Designer methods' which were then being vigorously promoted by their proponents: The Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Counselling learning, Psycho-drama – you name it, we did it. It is difficult to overestimate the excitement sweeping through our profession at the time.

This was also the period in which I really began to read widely among the books and articles relating to Applied Linguistics and ELT. I began to attend and present at the annual IATEFL conferences. I also travelled to the USA to present at TESOL and to a memorable Mediterranean institute held at ESADE in Barcelona, where I worked with Chris Brumfit and Earl Stevick (1980). The informal discussions with Earl and Chris were a further, life-changing stimulus to thinking about what I was doing. Earl was a brilliant teacher who opened my eyes to the humanistic approach to teaching, which was then in its infancy.

Another initiative which deeply affected my developing sense of plausibility was the collaboration with the Goethe Institut (teaching of German) and the AUPELF, CREDIF and BELC (teaching of French) in an annual small-scale symposium on a theme of interest. Manfred Heid, at the Goethe Institut, proved a valued colleague and link with the network of innovation in language teaching in Germany. Altogether we ran six of these symposia on themes such as Authenticity, Creativity, Roleplay and simulations, Reading comprehension and the Relationship between Society, Schools and Research. All of these were published by the Goethe Institut.

In retrospect, I can trace the development of my interest in these topics back to these influential meetings.

With the skills and experience of Alan Duff and Francoise Grellet to hand, it was not long before we started our collaboration on publishing books for the ELT market. Chance and good luck again played a hand. Adrian du Plessis at Cambridge University Press was launching a new series of resource books for teachers and invited us to contribute. He was an innovative editor and accepted all our proposals, however risky, in those early years, leading to resource books on drama, sounds, reading, art and visuals, creative dialogues, poetry and literature in general...It was a magic time when everything, briefly, was possible. I also teamed up with Francoise Grellet and Wim Welsing from Holland to write a course for Oxford University Press, called *Quartet*. It was highly innovative, and a total flop! But it gave me more valuable experience in materials design and in working as a team.

On the personal level, I was able to log the progress of my daughter, born in Ghana in 1970, first as a tri-lingual speaker of English, Italian and French, then of English and French. The miracle of child language acquisition posed many questions for me – most of them still unanswered. What effect did the French experience have on my development?

- a) I had the growing sense of contributing to a group of globally-active fellow-professionals, rather than simply remaining an onlooker.
- b) I experienced the power of mutually creative working relationships with individuals and teams.
- c) I learned a lot about language learning in general through the collaboration with major figures in the teaching of German and French.
- d) The freedom I enjoyed allowed me to explore in depth areas that had only vaguely interested me before. These included drama in education, extensive reading, visuals, especially art, the role of music and sound, the use of literature and especially poetry in teaching, games and problem-solving and creativity in general.
- e) I learnt a lot about publishing and how to translate ideas into classroom materials which others could use.
- f) Through my contacts with Earl Stevick in particular, I became convinced by the principles of humanistic education. I finally understood that the best kind of teaching is responding to learners' needs, not forcing a pre-conceived package on them. So that teachers need to 'get out of the light' and let learners learn.

China (1980 – 1984)

I was next posted to Beijing as First Secretary (Cultural Affairs) at the British Embassy. This was a necessary fiction in order that the British Council could start up in China after its expulsion in 1949. The historical moment was again significant. After the 10 years of chaos during the Cultural Revolution, China was beginning to open up again. The Gang of Four had been overthrown and were now on trial and Deng Xiaoping was cautiously implementing the Four Modernisations – one of which was Science and Technology, including Education. A whole generation of Chinese who had been denied further education were now filling the universities, and there were cohorts of students being sent overseas for training, most of whom needed English to pursue their studies. The country was full of so-called ‘Foreign Experts’ teaching English, many of whom had no qualification to do so, except a PhD in any subject at all.

My main task was managing aid-funded British teachers in key universities. This involved lengthy and sometimes tedious negotiations with the Ministry of Education and University authorities. The Chinese viewed these highly qualified and experienced teachers as passive linguistic drudges who were there simply to provide traditional teaching fodder for the students. They viewed themselves as active agents of pedagogical change, bringing contemporary perspectives to a hopelessly out-dated traditional view of learning. Mediating between these two opposing standpoints taught me a lot about the art of patient and persistent negotiation, and the building of trust in a cross-cultural situation.

I was also charged with inaugurating and managing the VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) programme in China. This took me to remote parts of China, where conditions for the young VSO teachers were often difficult both materially and psychologically.

A major language learning innovation was the acquisition by China Radio and TV of the BBC TV course, *Follow Me*. I collaborated with Hugh Howse of the BBC in persuading the Chinese to purchase *Follow Me* (at a knock-down price). My former assistant at British Council, Paris, Kathy Flower, had already presented these programmes in France, so I invited her to come to Beijing to do the same in China. Working in partnership with Hu Wenzhong to present the programmes made *Follow me* an immediate success, and Kathy became the equivalent of a rock star! Arguably, more young Chinese learnt English from *Follow Me* than from all the foreign experts put together.

At the Embassy I managed to set up a modest Resource centre for foreign teachers in China, which was intensively used. I also began to publish and distribute a Newsletter as an organ of communication and

sharing of information among the foreign teaching community. This was a useful induction which would stand me in good stead in India.

I conducted the piloting of the new ELTS test (now the IELTS) in centres across China. From these small beginnings, IELTS has now become a global business empire, which I now view much more critically than at the time.

On the personal level, I continued publishing more titles with CUP with Alan Duff. I also became more active in international conferences and in publishing articles in professional journals in China as well as in the West.

I also learned Mandarin Chinese to a reasonable level, thanks to my one-to-one teacher, provided by the Chinese Diplomatic Service Bureau. My teacher was ideal: kind and patient, responsive to my requests and willing to explore his own language with me in, for him, unfamiliar ways.

How did the China experience contribute to my sense of plausibility?

- a) I came to appreciate the need for sensitivity in cross-cultural encounters.
- b) I found some of my assumptions about Communicative methodology challenged, which led me to re-examine the effectiveness of more traditional methods.
- c) The power of visual media was strongly reinforced, through the success of *Follow Me*.
- d) I learned a lot about team-building and the need of teachers for psychological as well as professional support.
- e) Through my dealings with officials, I learned of the value of long-term building of trust through mutual adjustments over time.
- f) The *Follow Me* experience strengthened my faith in the value of good luck and being in the right place at the right time.
- g) Learning Chinese was a challenge which tested my assumptions about the value of memorisation.
- h) My Chinese teacher reinforced the value of teaching the person, not just the language.

India (1984 – 1988)

My job in India comprised two roles. I was Director, South India, which meant I was responsible for all aspects of the Council's work in South India, which included running a large office in Madras (now Chennai) and three libraries in Hyderabad, Bangalore and Trivandrum. Additionally, I was responsible for the Council's English language work across India, with

specialist English Studies officers in Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta. In Madras I was ably assisted by the senior All-India specialist, Dr N S Prabhu.

Linguistically, India is hugely complex. The official language is Hindi, with English as a second official language. There are 22 other languages used in the states making up India. In schools, generally, Hindi and English are taught in addition to the local state language. So, for example, in Tamil Nadu students would learn Hindi, English and Tamil, in Andhra Pradesh it would be English, Hindi and Telugu, and so on. In practice, English is widely used in administration, the law, commerce, higher education, the media...English is also regarded as the language of advancement and opportunity, and is used to a high degree of proficiency among the middle and upper classes of society.

The politics of English in India is complex and vastly different from in China. Whereas China was teaching English as a foreign language, India had had over 3 centuries of working contact with the language. In some ways this ensured an easy familiarity with English. In other ways, there was an ambivalence and even a hostility towards English as the language of the erstwhile colonial power. All of this underlined for me the importance of the context in which English is taught.

I will not dwell on the detail of my sojourn in India. But it affected my development in five main ways:

- a) I was greatly influenced by the ideas of Dr Prabhu and his proposal of a procedural syllabus based on tasks.
- b) I was immersed in the complexities of a pluri-lingual society, in which English had multiple and equivocal roles. Many of my assumptions about English as an International language had to be re-assessed in the light of this.
- c) I became re-enthused about literature in English. There was a plethora of established and up-and-coming poets, novelists and playwrights in English. I ran two Short story competitions with subsequent publications of winning entries. India also stimulated my first interest in creative writing as a support for language learning.
- d) It was in India that I first became interested in the importance of the voice for teachers. This emerged from a visit by Patsy Rodenburg, then voice coach at the Royal Shakespeare Company. This was an epiphany for me, and led me to develop courses for teachers on voice, and the publication of *The Language Teacher's Voice* (Maley, 2000).
- e) David Horsburgh, the founder of the revolutionary educational experiment at Neel Bagh died a week after my arrival in India. But I

soon had the opportunity to visit his unconventional school and was deeply affected by his views on institutional education (Horsburgh, 2004), shared by other thinkers such as Ken Robinson (2016) and John Holt (1982). This transformed my own views on Education and the need for radical change.

Bell at Cambridge (1988 – 1993)

I resigned from the British Council on leaving India to take up the post of Director-General of the Bell Educational Trust in Cambridge, where I stayed for 5 years. This was mainly a managerial / leadership role.

Bell was widely regarded as one of the top private language teaching institutions in the UK. It ran 6 schools in southern England which offered year round courses as well as prestigious summer schools for teachers. It was also involved in overseas projects worldwide, including a big UNDP project in China.

This was really my first encounter with the commodification of English. Though Bell was a Charitable Trust, it still needed to turn a profit to be re-invested in the Trust's activities. Questions of cost-benefit, competition with other providers and sustaining quality were high on the agenda. I learned a lot about business – and about sharp practices in the commercial sector of ELT. This made me acutely uneasy about the negative effects of commercialisation of language learning.

My time at Bell came at another political turning point with the demise of communism in Russia and in Central Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This coincided with my conviction that, if Bell was to survive, it needed to establish schools outside the UK. Accordingly, we set up schools in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland and developed partnerships with other schools in Italy and Poland. We also set up shop in Thailand and Indonesia.

The belief in the need to ensure honest high quality and in the power of association led to the founding of EAQUALS (European Association of Quality Language Schools), which held its inaugural meeting at Bell Cambridge.

One of the continuing preoccupations for the Bell teaching staff was the need for constant Teacher Development to avoid routinisation, turn off, burnout and complacency. Nurturing and motivating such a group of high-quality teachers with long experience was a constant challenge.

This linked with my own continuing personal development/learning, which was in danger of being side-lined by the administrative demands of my job. I tried to sustain my own learning pathway by writing reviews,

mainly for the ELTJ, to keep up with current publications. I also continued as Series Editor for the Oxford Resource Books for Teachers (I had started this in 1986), which kept me in touch with new ideas from fellow professionals. I also wrote a regular column on various aspects of ELT for *Practical English Teacher* from 1989 to 1993 and continued to present at conferences worldwide.

I had been elected as President of IATEFL in 1988, which also kept me actively involved with developments in the profession. The political changes in east and central Europe led to a spate of new IATEFL associate associations in those countries and for me, a period of intensive travel.

What were the enduring effects of the Bell experience?

- a) Renewed belief in my need for constant exploration and lifelong learning.
- b) A growing scepticism about the Native Speaker hegemony in ELT.
- c) Critical concern at the negative effects of the commodification and commercialisation of English.
- d) Confirmation of the power of association, through my involvement in EAQUALS and IATEFL especially.

Singapore (1993 – 1998)

With the help of N.S. Prabhu, who had left India to take up a post at the National University of Singapore, I was appointed Senior Fellow in the Department of English. There, I taught a variety of undergraduate and masters' courses, and supervised dissertations and theses.

Besides existing courses, I was encouraged to develop new ones. These included a Voice course for Theatre Studies students, and courses in Presentation skills and the Teaching of writing. These were all a natural outgrowth from my earlier developing interests. I also developed a masters' module on Creativity, which served to heighten my interest in that topic subsequently.

This was my first experience of university teaching. Although I was given a free hand by the department, I developed a sceptical view of the administration of teaching, especially the over-concern with exam grades. I found the way that grades were manipulated to achieve statistical tidiness disconcerting. I also felt highly critical of the requirement for students to write 'research' theses. These were largely a time-consuming formality which contributed nothing to the sum of human knowledge.

There was a lively literary scene in Singapore and I was able to hear at first hand from many Singaporean and Asian writers. RELC (Regional English Language Centre) still ran its annual regional conferences, which

enabled me to keep in touch with a wide range of professional contacts. It also had a first-class library.

Singapore had opted for the active moulding of language policy. Although there were 4 official languages: Mandarin Chinese, Tamil, Malay and English, it was English which was dominant. And this was the result of deliberate policy decisions over the years since independence and separation from Malaysia in 1965. One result was that many of my students were no longer functional in their mother tongues and many households had become English-speaking.

The Singapore experience added these layers of my 'sense of plausibility' to those already laid down:

- a) Scepticism about the value attributed to research.
- b) Concern at the dominance of institutional factors over educational values.
- c) Concern about the social and psychological costs of English replacing vernacular languages.
- d) Renewed interest in Literature in English and in the range of issues to do with English as an International Language.
- e) Renewed energy from the sheer joy of teaching.

Bangkok (2009 – 2014)

On leaving Singapore, I was invited to set up and run a new MA programme in TEFL at the private, Catholic Assumption University (ABAC) in Bangkok. This offered a splendid opportunity to put the past experiences and the conclusions I had drawn from them to the reality test. There were a number of key features to our programme:

- ~ we recruited largely non-native speakers as faculty. These included teachers from Burma, Singapore, Italy, India, Holland and Thailand. My rationale for this was that it reflected the global nature of English, and that it put competence above provenance.
- ~ our students were also drawn from a variety of mainly Asian countries: China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan and Thailand. My rationale for this was to capitalise on the mix of traditions and cultures as a rich resource for learning from each other.
- ~ our aim was to offer education of the highest quality. Students were expected to give 100% effort. Needless to say, our initial drop-out rates were high, as some students who came expecting an easy ride faded away.
- ~ to ensure the best quality teachers, I was able to negotiate good salaries and conditions for them. This included relatively few teaching hours,

thus allowing them time for personal supervision of students, research, writing and participation in professional events.

- ~ I was also able to design and offer innovative courses which would stretch our students to their limits. These included Presentation skills, Theory and practice of writing, Creative writing and Theory and practice of reading. These derived in part from my experiences in Singapore.
- ~ I reduced to the minimum permitted the importance of grades based on examinations and tests. Students were largely assessed through continuing assessment throughout the course. The teaching practicum was also an important element.
- ~ the effect of all this was to create a living learning community, with a sense of self-pride in its achievements.

After I left, the power of mediocrity and conformism reasserted itself in the administration. The faculty therefore deserted the programme, which was reduced to a shadow of its former self.

How did the Bangkok experience contribute to my 'sense of plausibility'?

- a) it confirmed my belief in offering students creative challenges.
- b) it demonstrated the importance of treating colleagues with respect and creating space for them to continue their development.
- c) it also confirmed my belief in the importance of teachers who are competent rather than simply native speakers.
- d) it amply fulfilled my expectation that students (and faculty) would learn a lot from each other.
- e) it enabled me to continue to seek out new channels for professional growth.

After leaving Bangkok, I officially 'retired', though I continued to write for publication, to act as visiting professor in some universities and to participate in workshops and conferences.

Causes and effects

I shall now try to identify the influences on my professional make-up and set out the characteristics they have helped to bring into being. First I shall list the major strands of interest, then acknowledge the personalities who have most influenced me. Finally I shall attempt to enumerate the beliefs, values and practices which characterise my current state.

Emerging strands

Looking back over this trajectory, I can now identify a number of strands which have woven themselves into the fabric of my professional profile.

- a) **Aesthetic approach and Creativity.** I have become deeply committed to an artistic concept of language learning. This has included Literature, Story-telling, Drama, Music, Art and Creative writing in particular. The theory and practice of creativity in general is a constantly developing interest (Maley & Peachey, 2015; Maley and Kiss, 2017). I have consistently advocated an aesthetic approach through publications. And in 2014 I co-founded the C Group (Creativity for Change in Language Education) <http://thecreativitygroup.weebly.com>
- b) **Creative Writing** This has become a central strand in my life. It brings together my own life as a writer with my beliefs in the power of creative writing to unleash unsuspected capabilities in students and to build self-esteem and motivation among them. The Asian Teacher-Writer group (2003-14) was one way of furthering these ideas <https://flexiblelearning.auckland.ac.nz/cw/index.html>
- c) **Voice.** The absence of voice education for language teachers is a scandal, so since the 1980's I have been engaged in a one-man crusade to put voice on the map. How is it possible that the profession has neglected this key resource for so long? In 2000 I published a book on the subject (Maley, 2000). Voice is key to how we establish the learning atmosphere and shape the learning experience. It is an essential part of the teacher's classroom 'presence'.
- d) **Reading.** I have long been an advocate of the value of Extensive Reading(ER) as a key factor in language acquisition. I was a co-founder of the Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF) (www.erfoundation.org) in 2003. So I wrote a number of graded readers combining interesting content with accessible language. (Maley, 1997, 1999).
I also believe strongly that teachers would do well to read widely outside their own narrow professional literature. 'Reading maketh a full man...' as Bacon wrote. So, between 2009-2014, I wrote a regular column (*Over the Wall*) in English Teaching Professional dedicated to introducing books from outside the language teaching ghetto. Among other things this was in the hope of interesting teachers in the idea of 'feeder fields'.
- e) **Global Issues.** My experiences in Ghana, India, China and Thailand in particular had alerted me to the importance of including Global Issues in language teaching programmes, if for no other reason than

that they offer stimulating and relevant content. These issues are in any case important in the context of broader education, where we are educators and not merely language instructors with a duty to raise awareness and take action. This is why I helped start the Global Issues SIG within IATEFL in 1994. I also co-edited a recent book of practical approaches to these issues. (Maley & Peachey, 2017).

- f) **Power of association.** Teachers who form groups offer each other a framework of support in the face of their daily problems and strength in dealing with future challenges and developing innovative solutions. All along I have seen this as a key feature of Teacher Development. My experience as a member of IATEFL and its SIGs, EAQUALS, ERF, The Asia Writers Group and C Group have only served to strengthen this belief.
- g) **Materials development.** The power of materials writing as a form of teacher development was first realised by Brian Tomlinson (2003), who founded MATSDA (Materials Development Association.) in 1993. Issues in materials design have been a central part of my professional life since my earliest publications. (Maley 2003)
- h) **My critical strand.** There are some aspects of our profession which I regard with acute scepticism and I have consistently attempted to draw attention to them through articles and conference presentations. They include:
 - ~ the imbalance of power between the academic/research community on the one hand and the teaching community on the other. The high claims of the former are largely unsubstantiated and the merits of classroom teachers are routinely undervalued. (Maley, 2016)
 - ~ the spread of English with its concomitant commodification and undermining of other languages.
 - ~ the coining of faddish notions, such as ELF, which serve no good purpose except to promote an academic niche community and are in any case unnecessary to account for the phenomenon of English used internationally. (Maley, 2011).
 - ~ the uncritical adoption of technology to solve pedagogical problems. I have argued for a more measured approach to the use of technology.
 - ~ the hegemony of testing within ELT, especially the large scale commercialisation of tests. When the testing tail wags the teaching dog, it can only be at the expense of the dog.

~ the bureaucratisation of institutional education. Whenever the interests of real education and bureaucratic convenience collide, it is always the latter which win out. I have tried to promote the ideas of educational iconoclasts as a way of combatting this tendency. (Freire, 1972; Holt, 1982; Horsburgh, 2004; Robinson, 2016).

Influences

This is a selection of key people whose influence I can clearly define. There are, of course, unnumbered others who have influenced me in less personal and more subtle ways.

My teacher of French at secondary school, John Carr, opened the window of foreign languages for me. He changed my life and to him I owe my lifelong passion for learning and using languages.

My teacher of English, Gwyneth Lloyd, instilled in me the love of my own language and its literature. 65 years later, her mellifluous Welsh voice still rings in my inner ear.

Alan Duff, my co-author, was the ideal sounding board and partner in the hatching of innovative ideas. He was a poet, translator and brilliant partner in intellectual adventure.

My editor at CUP, Adrian du Plessis, was an inspiration and stout supporter for me (and Alan) in our early years as writers. He effectively transformed the publishing of ELT at CUP, and was a fund of wisdom and advice. I learnt a great deal about publishing from him.

Dr N.S. Prabhu, had a great talent for thinking the unthinkable and then implementing his radical ideas (Prabhu, 1987, 1988, 1990). He was a transformational thinker who helped me develop a critical stance toward conventional thinking.

Robert O'Neill, that brilliant eccentric, who was the pioneer of new-style course-books in the 1970s, taught me so much about developing materials. He wrote brilliant dialogues, combining wit and humour with accessible and learnable language. He was also outstandingly generous to novice teachers, and a living example of a dedicated mentor.

Earl Stevick (1980) opened my eyes to the central position of the human in teaching/learning. He demonstrated the importance of lightness of touch and responsiveness to learners' diverse needs. He taught me how to stand back so that the students would have a space to learn in.

John Fanselow taught me the power of careful, detailed observation and showed how small changes in teaching can have disproportionately large effects (Fanselow, 1978, 1992). Another truly radical thinker, and major influence.

Andrew Wright showed me the power of story-telling, to which he has devoted his life. We are the stories we embody and to harness this to language learning is a major insight. Working with him in performance and on publications, as well as engaging in many conversations, has enriched my ideas on teaching.

Jayakaran Mukundan has been an inspiration through his innovative vision of conferences as opportunities for teachers to engage with the aesthetic side of teaching. We have also worked together on creative writing workshops in Asia, where his mercurial ideas and infectious energy were an inspiration. Like O'Neill, he is also generous to novice teachers.

Adrian Underhill has been a generator of ideas for me. Our regular meetings over lunch have been truly mutual learning conversations from which ideas about the importance of spontaneity and improvisation have emerged. (Underhill, 2014)

Summary of Beliefs, Values and Practices

Based on the foregoing, it is now possible to enumerate some of the elements of my evolving practical philosophy of teaching and learning languages.

My Beliefs about language.

- Learning a new language is good for me. It keeps my mind active. It shines new light on the human condition. It affords me infinite pleasure.
- The more languages I learn, the easier it becomes. (My current project is to learn Greek).
- Massive amounts of reading is one of the keys to learning, sustaining and developing another language.
- I can learn a lot alone but can profit from timely and appropriate intervention by teachers or mentors. I can also learn a lot from my peers.
- Keeping my own language in good condition is also important. I do this through reading and writing creatively.

About teaching

- There is no best method (Prabhu, 1990).
- I need to teach the person (s) in front of me, not just the language as a subject.
- All students are individuals with different needs and diverse ways of learning.

- I need to be aware of the total context of my teaching: geographical, political, sociological and material.
- I must never underestimate the capacity of my students to surprise me. And I must give them the space and time to unlock their creative resources.
- I know I need to establish rapport with a new group within seconds of starting the first class with them.
- After that, I must rapidly build a learning community in which trust and good humoured playfulness are paramount, and where praise and blame are largely irrelevant – what Wajnryb (2003) calls a ‘storied class’.
- Teaching is not just about the subject but should include more broadly educational features such as Global Issues (Maley & Peachey, 2017).
- My job is to provide ‘compelling’ content, to offer engaging activities and to provide useful feedback and support to my students.
- It does not help to teach harder: learning is done by learners, not by me. I need to listen and observe closely so as to tailor my responses to their emerging needs.
- I must prepare and make plans but must then be ready to throw them away as unforeseen learning opportunities occur. I must learn to go with the Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).
- I must be a role model and show my practical commitment to what I do. I must also be willing to engage in the tasks I set my students.

About personal development.

- Luck is important, including being in the right place at the right time. But we also make our own luck through our attitudes. It is not just what happens to me but what I decide to do with it that counts. And it helps to be prepared to work with what happens.
- Friends and colleagues are one of my most valuable resources. It is in free-ranging ‘learning conversations’ when new ideas and insights are sparked.
- The power of groups in offering psychological support, in sharing information and in developing solidarity has been crucial for me.
- Hard work helps - but I also need to be intellectually and psychologically alert so that I notice what opportunities happen along.

Concluding remarks. So what...?

I have tried to amplify Prabhu's notion of 'the teacher's sense of plausibility' with reference to my own history in language and language teaching. But why did I bother to do this?

Socrates reportedly said, 'The unexamined life is not worth living.' (ὁ ... ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ) I believe that retrospective reflection on our professional development can be highly revealing. It can help strip away unexamined suppositions and prejudices and this can feed into changes in our current practice.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I believe that there is an over-emphasis in teacher training as an algorithmic system, and that not enough attention is paid to the human, personal side of learning and teaching. Regular group sharing and discussion of individual 'senses of plausibility' can be highly rewarding as part of a teacher training programme.

Such a programme could draw on a number of published sources too. These include Lew Barnett's, *The Way We Are*, a collection of teachers' reports on their histories as teachers. Esther Ramani's *Theorising from the classroom* (1987) is an early example of looking at teachers' conceptualisation of their practices. Ephraim Weintraub's ideas in *Ghosts behind the blackboard*, (1989) highlight the way we are all in some sense replicating the way we ourselves were taught. There is also the classic account of a language teacher's life in Appel (1995). Pickett's survey of experienced language learners personal accounts is also suggestive and could be replicated (Pickett, 1978). My own account of teacher creativity might also be the starting point for further work (Maley & Kiss, 2017). There is also an interesting on-going project in China run by Richard Young which should yield useful results (Young, 2016).

I conclude with Young's comments in his study proposal (2016):

'Very few previous studies in applied linguistics have addressed the synergy between the personal history of teachers and learners and the discourse of language learning in the classroom...'

It is time to change that.

Alan Maley. December 2017

The author

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General of the Bell Educational Trust in Cambridge (1988-1993). He was Senior Fellow at the National University of Singapore (1993-1998) before going on to set up a new MA programme at Assumption University, Bangkok (1999-2004). He has since held university positions in Malaysia and Vietnam. He is now a freelance trainer, writer and consultant. He has published over 50 books and numerous articles. He is a past President of IATEFL and recipient of the ELTons Lifetime Achievement Award (2012). He is also a co-founder of the C Group (<http://thecreativitygroup.weebly.com>).

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